

## ***Teaching Your Kids About Food Advertising and Marketing***

Like many parents, you may be concerned about how the food advertisements your children see affect their eating habits.

Kids ask for products such as fast food, cookies, candy, chips and soft drinks for many reasons. For example, kids like the taste or might associate eating them with fun family times. Seeing ads for these products is another reason kids request them. Nutrition experts agree that all foods can fit into a healthful diet when children and adults practice balance, variety and moderation in their food choices. It's important to teach children that foods such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables, lean meats and low-fat dairy products contain more nutrients (such as vitamins and minerals) than other foods and should form the foundation of their diets. Good ways to help your children make healthful choices are to show them how to follow the Food Guide Pyramid, lead by example and help them understand and evaluate food ads.

### **Helping Kids Understand and Evaluate Food Ads**

A good way to begin evaluating food advertising messages is to point out products in television and magazine ads, and ask your children to describe the similarities and differences. While discussing the ads, ask:

- What methods (e.g., animation, music, bright colors or celebrities) do the manufacturers use to sell their products?
- How do these methods affect your children's thoughts about these products? Do the props make the product more interesting to them?
- What is the message? (e.g., you'll be stronger, smarter, have more fun if you eat/drink the product.) Do your children believe it?
- How does the portion size of the product shown compare to what's recommended by the Food Guide Pyramid? How does it compare to the amount your child usually eats?

A product's packaging is another way to draw attention to the product. To illustrate, ask your children to examine an apple; then ask them to look at the packaging or labels on apple juice, applesauce or apple pie. Ask them to explain the similarities and differences between each product, and what they find attractive about each product.

### **Special Promotions: Premiums, Sweepstakes and Contests, Clubs**

Three popular methods of marketing foods are "premiums," "sweepstakes and contests" and "clubs." These are appropriate forms of children's advertising as long as they meet the Children's Advertising Review Unit's (CARU) Self-Regulatory Guidelines for Children's Advertising (discussed in next section). Knowing about the following CARU suggestions for advertisers can help you and your children benefit from these types of ads.

#### ***Premiums***

Premiums have been around since Dick Tracy decoder rings and Little Orphan Annie stickers were offered more than 60 years ago. Children sometimes have difficulty distinguishing products from premiums. Therefore, CARU suggests that advertisers do the following:

- If product advertising contains a premium message, the child's attention should be focused primarily on the product. The premium message must clearly be secondary.
- Conditions of a premium offer should be stated simply and clearly. Disclaimers and disclosures should be stated in terms that can be understood by the child audience.

### **Sweepstakes and Contests**

Sweepstakes can be exciting, as any adult who has played a lottery or entered a drawing can attest. Advertisers must be careful not to raise children's expectations about their chances of winning or inflate their perception of the prize(s) offered. When you see an ad with a sweepstakes, notice if the advertiser has followed these points:

- The prize(s) should be clearly presented.
- The likelihood of winning should be clearly noted in the audio portion of the commercial in language children can understand.
- All prizes should be appropriate for the child audience.
- Alternate means of entry should be disclosed.
- Online contests should not require the child to provide more information than is necessary and, where possible, should be limited to providing the child's and parent's e-mail addresses. When a child enters a contest, parents should be contacted directly to provide offline contact information to fulfill the contest.

### **Kids' Clubs**

Kids love clubs! Anytime your children want to join a club, be sure to ask several key questions (What will you get? What will the club entitle you to? Is a purchase necessary? How much do you have to spend?) Before advertisers use the word "club," the following requirements should be met:

- Interactivity—The child should perform some action whereby he or she joins the club and receives something in return (e.g., filling out a form or application and receiving a card or certificate). Watching a program or eating in a restaurant does not constitute membership.
- Continuity—There should be an ongoing relationship between the club and members, such as a newsletter.
- Exclusivity—The activities or benefits derived from club membership should be exclusive to its members.

Be sure that any information that the sponsoring organization receives about your children is used only for this club and not released to other services.

### **CARU's Self-Regulatory Guidelines for Children's Advertising**

The Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) of the Council of Better Business Bureaus is the industry-supported self-regulatory system of the children's advertising industry.

CARU works with the industry to ensure that advertising directed to kids is truthful, and above all, fair. By promoting adherence to self-regulatory guidelines, CARU seeks to maintain a balance between regulating the messages children receive from advertising and promoting the dissemination of important information to children through advertising.

CARU's Guidelines\* are based on the following seven basic principles:

1. Advertisers should always take into account the level of knowledge, sophistication and maturity of the audience to which their message is primarily directed. Younger children have a limited capacity for evaluating the credibility of information they receive. They also may lack the ability to understand the nature of the information provided. Advertisers, therefore, have a special responsibility to protect children from their own susceptibilities.
2. Realizing that children are imaginative and that make-believe play constitutes an important part of the growing up process, advertisers should exercise care not to exploit unfairly the imaginative quality of children. Unreasonable expectations of product quality or performance should not be stimulated either directly or indirectly by advertising.
3. Products and content which are inappropriate for use by children should not be advertised or promoted directly to children.

4. Recognizing that advertising may play an important part in educating the child, advertisers should communicate information in a truthful and accurate manner and in language understandable to young children with full recognition that the child may learn practices from advertising which can affect his or her health and well-being.
5. Advertisers are urged to capitalize on the potential of advertising to influence behavior by developing advertising that, wherever possible, addresses itself to positive and beneficial social behavior, such as friendship, kindness, honesty, justice, generosity and respect for others.
6. Care should be taken to incorporate minority and other groups in advertisements in order to present positive and pro-social roles and role models wherever possible. Social stereotyping and appeals to prejudice should be avoided.
7. Although many influences affect a child's personal and social development, it remains the prime responsibility of the parents to provide guidance for children. Advertisers should contribute to this parent-child relationship in a constructive manner.

\*The Guidelines apply to advertising addressed to children under age 12, except for Internet and online advertising, which apply to children under age 13.

To learn more about the CARU Self-Regulatory Guidelines for Children's Advertising or to find out how to complain about a children's ad that runs afoul of CARU standards: [www.caru.org](http://www.caru.org)